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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001913

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ' CONSTITUTIONAL PACKAGE: OPPOSITION DIVIDED  
(AGAIN)

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT RICHARD DOWNES,  
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. Less than ten weeks before a constitutional referendum, Venezuela's opposition parties remain splintered as to how to oppose President Chavez' sweeping reforms. Leading opposition parties advocate voting "no" while more hard-line opposition parties promote abstention. Opposition leaders privately concede that they are starting late, are poorly organized, and lack the voter mobilization resources Chavez has. University students are returning to campuses but so far have not resumed street protests. The Catholic Church is likely to release a critical analysis of Chavez' proposals in late October. Sumate and other NGOs are trying to elicit greater public debate. At this stage, constitutional reform opponents are more focused on minimizing their political losses than on defeating Chavez' controversial package. End Summary

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To Vote or Not to Vote  
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12. (SBU) Opposition parties all oppose Chavez' package of constitutional reforms and reportedly agreed September 25 to coordinate a "no" campaign consisting of teach-ins, pamphleteering, and demonstrations. They are badly divided, however, on whether they should participate in the December 2007 public referendum. Party leaders from Primero Justicia (PJ), the Christian Democrats (COPEI), and the left-wing parties Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) and La Causa R have all publicly indicated that their parties intend to mobilize "no" voters in the upcoming referendum. Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) says it intends to go to the polls so long as electoral conditions are acceptable. Accion Democratica (AD), the National Resistance Command (CNR), and Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP) argue that the BRV's electronic voting system is rigged in Chavez' favor and therefore advocate abstention. The latter two openly advocate street protests and civil resistance.

13. (C) Since Chavez announced his proposals to change 33 articles of the 1999 Constitution on August 15, opposition parties appeared to spend as much time criticizing each other as Chavez' constitutional proposals. The abstentionists accused the participating parties of "selling out" to the government. The participating parties accused the abstentionists of handing Chavez a guaranteed political

victory. More recently, the opposition parties reached agreement on a "non-aggression" pact to avoid publicly criticizing each others' positions, according to Un Nuevo Tiempo Secretary General Gerardo Blyde. Blyde told PolCouns September 24 that all the opposition parties meet periodically to discuss general strategy while opposition parties intending to vote in the referendum meet separately to try to coordinate their electoral efforts.

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Lacking Organization  
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¶4. (C) Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez of Un Nuevo Tiempo told PolCouns September 24 that if the opposition is going to compete against the BRV in the December referendum, opposition parties should already be organizing election day logistics, including training at least 70,000 election witnesses. He suggested that if opposition parties do not get started soon on referendum day logistics, they may later feel compelled to join the abstentionists simply because they will lack the ability to mobilize "no" voters during the December 2 referendum. Blyde told PolCouns that 40% of the opposition's trained election day witnesses left polling stations during the 2006 presidential election before the polls closed, many because they felt intimidated by Chavistas and/or military personnel.

¶5. (C) The opposition appears to be facing even greater organizational problems outside of the capital. PolCouns met with opposition party leaders in the eastern state of Monagas during his September 17-18 visit to Maturin. PJ and COPEI leaders confirmed their parties' intention to go to the polls, although local party leaders admitted that they were still not convinced that participating in the referendum was the best strategy. Accion Democratica mayors in Monagas told PolCouns that they believe AD Secretary General Henry Ramos Allup is "ruining the party" but nevertheless they would heed

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his abstentionist policy. The AD leaders also said they were afraid to confront the Chavez government at this time. PolCouns stopped by the local UNT headquarters, but it was closed.

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Token Consultation  
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¶6. (C) Leaders from PJ, AD, and MAS met September 10 with the National Assembly (NA) Commission that is managing the legislature's three "readings" of Chavez' constitutional proposals leading up to the December 2 public referendum. MAS Secretary General Leopoldo Pucchi told Poloff that his party presented its concerns to the NA with the expectation that their presentation would be broadcast by state media. It was not. Moreover, the parties were limited to 15 minute presentations (although AD exceeded that time limit). UNT and other opposition parties decided not to seek meetings with the NA for fear of "legitimizing" what they perceive as token public consultation. The NA approved Chavez' proposals without changes in a second reading on September 11. The third and final NA reading is likely to take place by November.

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Where Are the Students?  
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¶7. (C) University students have not organized any major street demonstrations since summer vacation started in late June. Student demonstrators had surprised the BRV by organizing numerous street protests in the wake of the BRV's May 31 closure of the private, independent free-to-airwaves RCTV broadcast network. Students have held two student congresses to better organize themselves, but have not

reached a common position on how or if to oppose Chavez' proposed constitutional package. Student leader Jon Goicochea recently told Conoff that he and other student leaders believe the BRV will win the December 2 referendum. Consequently, Goicochea said he is advocating postponing student protests until after the new constitutional changes take effect. They also must take into consideration the Defense and Interior Ministers threats to suppress any illegal demonstrations. Political parties are urging students to be more active sooner, and some student groups say they expect to resume demonstrations by mid-October.

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Catholic Church Preparing A Position  
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18. (C) The Venezuelan Conference of Catholic Bishops (CEV) is planning to release a formal position on Chavez' constitutional proposals on October 20, according to CEV official Monsignor Jorge Villasmil. The bishops already released a July 7 pastoral letter that urged the government to implement the existing constitution rather than seek new amendments to it. Villasmil told Poloff September 20 that he expects the Catholic Bishops to convey "firm criticism" of the anti-democratic elements of the proposed changes. He was less certain that the CEV would do more than outline their concerns and urge parishioners to vote "no," noting the inherent difficulty of achieving such a consensus position among over 40 bishops. The Catholic Church's stand will be important because the Church continues to enjoy considerable credibility among most Venezuelans and can be influential even in Chavez strongholds.

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Electoral NGO's Mobilizing  
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19. (C) Leaders of electoral NGO Sumate told PolCouns September 20 that they are actively promoting greater public debate of Chavez' proposed constitutional changes. While they believe Chavez will secure passage of the changes in the December 2 referendum, Sumate is trying to maximize the political cost to the Venezuelan president. Sumate does not plan to train election monitors ("testigos"), but intends to mount a limited election observation campaign at about 400 polling stations. Leaders of the NGO Ojo Electoral recently told DCM and PolCouns that they are also actively fostering more public discussion of Chavez' constitutional package. More specifically, Ojo Electoral is focusing public attention on the anti-democratic nature of many of Chavez' proposed

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changes.

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Comment  
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110. (C) Opposition leaders lament that Chavez has boxed them in, putting them in the difficult position of trying to minimize their political losses. If they go to the polls, they are likely to lose given Chavez' ability to mobilize voters with a mixture of state resources and intimidation. If they abstain, Chavez will boast that the larger margin of victory is a clear mandate for his "Socialism in the 21st Century" and accuse the opposition of being anti-democratic. If they present their own ideas for constitutional change, like Primero Justicia has, they imply there is a need for constitutional revisions. If they do not, as in the case of Un Nuevo Tiempo which had originally promised to do so, the BRV accuses the opposition of vision-less obstructionism.

111. (C) Moreover, the opposition lacks a compelling leader who can compete with Chavez. Former consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales is no longer able to pull together opposition parties in the way that he did in late 2006.

Hard-line opposition parties openly accuse him of "selling out" to Chavez by conceding electoral defeat hours after presidential balloting closed on December 6, 2006. Consequently, opposition leaders themselves concede that President Chavez at this stage is likely to win approval for his constitutional package, including the elimination of presidential term limits and the imposition of greater central control over local governments.

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